

WASHINGTON (August 6) – Palliative care legislation cosponsored by Congressman Spencer Bachus (AL-6) was featured in an article in the Birmingham News on Sunday, August 5.

UAB, Congressman Bachus Raising Palliative Care's Profile on Capitol Hill **by Mary Orndorff**

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Palliative care, the growing medical specialty that incorporates quality of life concerns with disease-curing treatment, would be elevated to a national priority under legislation pending in Congress.

With a Birmingham congressman as one of the co-sponsors and UAB as one of the institutions on the forefront of the movement, the burgeoning campaign by advocates of palliative care already carries an Alabama flavor.

"We need to have a national conversation about quality of life care," said Dr. Rodney Tucker, director of the Center for Palliative and Supportive Care at the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Medicine.

Palliative care is different from hospice. It addresses the pain, stress or other symptoms that accompany the treatment for a serious but not necessarily terminal illness. Although palliative care is most associated with cancer, Tucker said, many patients and their families could benefit from it, including those suffering from heart failure, HIV or dementia. It coordinates health care professionals from many fields to treat the physical, mental and emotional symptoms that come with the disease.

Tucker said palliative care improves the quality of life during the treatment, as well as the overall outcome of the treatment. The practice involves doctors, nurses, physical therapists, psychologists, nutritionists and many other health care providers.

"We take care of patients and their families in a much more broad context," Tucker said.

Two pieces of legislation were introduced last month in the U.S. House and Senate that together would call for a national summit on the benefits of palliative care, create research centers, and finance grants and fellowships for education and training. One of the bills already has bipartisan support from sponsors Rep. Spencer Bachus, R-Vestavia Hills, and Rep. Emanuel Cleaver, D-Mo.

"Right now, thousands of patients who are suffering from pain, shortness of breath, nausea and other symptoms of chronic disease have no idea that palliative care is available to them and can help relieve their symptoms and help them focus on getting well. Rep. Cleaver's and Rep. Bachus' bill is all about educating the public, the health care establishment and creating new research -- these are the building blocks of forward-thinking health care delivery reform," said Chris Hansen, president of the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network. "These bills will help patients live longer and will save the system money."

Bachus, who is scheduled to tour the UAB center during the August congressional recess, said palliative care can fill gaps in the follow-up care for those who are living longer after a diagnosis of a serious illness.

"Through better awareness and coordination of services, we can help people more easily resume daily life after difficult medical treatments," Bachus said.

The bill from Bachus and Cleaver, who are both members of the House Financial Services Committee, calls for a national summit and report on the industry.

A second bill from Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., would address the shortfall in palliative care providers by financing more palliative care training in medical schools. It would create up to 24 Palliative Care Education Centers and establish fellowships for faculty.

"Right now, there are simply not enough well-trained doctors to handle the overwhelming need for specialized treatment coordinated with patients, their families and across all their health care providers," Wyden said.

Tucker, who was in Washington recently to promote the legislation, said UAB's center was created about 12 years ago and has 15 physician faculty members who see patients in three clinical programs in Birmingham at the VA Medical Center, UAB Hospital and Children's of Alabama.